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Teri, left, and Terrence Martin of Southfield, Mich., the adoptive parents of a 13-year-old boy abandoned in Nebraska under that state's safe haven law, appear in Oakland County juvenile court in Pontiac, Mich., Friday, Oct. 17, 2008. The state of Michigan has been granted temporary custody of four suburban Detroit children after one of them was abandoned in Nebraska under that state's safe haven law. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)

Mich. gets custody of abandoned teen, siblings

By ED WHITE – 2 days ago

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — The state of Michigan was granted temporary custody Friday of four suburban Detroit siblings, including a 13-year-old abandoned in Nebraska by his mother under that state's unique safe haven law. An Oakland County juvenile court referee scolded Teri Martin for dropping off her adopted son at an Omaha hospital with \$10 earlier this week. The teen could be back in Michigan by Monday.

Nebraska is not a "humane society for animals," Referee Karla Mallett said. "He is a child." Juvenile court referees in Michigan preside over hearings where there are allegations of abuse or neglect.

"We get calls, 10 a week at least, for assistance with children's behavior. That call was not made by you," Mallett told Martin.

Martin, 38, and her 39-year-old husband, Terrence, didn't speak about the case during the hearing and declined to comment outside court. Her lawyer, Alan Byrd, told reporters there's another side to the story.

"There were extenuating circumstances. This is round one," he said.

The Southfield couple have three other children, ages 10, 5, and 3. The kids spent Thursday night with a relative but were being moved to foster care Friday. The Martins will be able to see them but only under supervision.

All states have laws designed to allow desperate new mothers to leave their newborns in safe hands, but Nebraska's law allows parents to abandon older children and even teenagers at hospitals.

At least 18 children have been abandoned in Nebraska since the law took effect in July, including two from other states.

Martin, two relatives and the teen departed Southfield for a 725-mile drive to Nebraska on Oct. 11. The boy was left at a hospital at 1:15 a.m. on Oct. 13.

Martin told Nebraska officials that she took the boy there to "scare him," according to a report by the Michigan Department of Human Services.

"It's quite shocking. ... I've never heard of anything like that," the county's chief deputy prosecutor, Deborah Carley, said.

The report also cited a history of referrals to child-welfare officials because of reports of injuries to the teen. Carley is seeking to eliminate the Martins' parental rights over the 13-year-old. The next court hearing is Nov. 7.

"We think there are some possibilities they could learn to parent the other three safely," Carley said.

Nebraska has agreed to drop jurisdiction over the teen and let Michigan help him.

The boy "lives here. He goes to school here. He's our resident," Carley said. "We need to take care of him."



Saturday, October 18, 2008

Parents lose custody of 4 kids

They tried to hide abuse of teen left in Neb. to keep other kids, prosecutor says; trial pending.

Francis X. Donnelly / The Detroit News

PONTIAC -- The parents of a Southfield teen abandoned in Nebraska had tried to hide abuse of the child and an earlier attempt to get rid of him because they were afraid it could lead to them losing all four of their children, authorities said.

As much as they didn't want the abandoned boy, they wanted to hold on to his three siblings, according to a family history described in a prosecutor's petition for custody.

The parents' worst nightmare was realized Friday when a juvenile court official temporarily placed all four children under the supervision of the state pending a trial to permanently revoke their parental rights to the abandoned boy. Prosecutors may seek to terminate their rights to the other children as well.

In suspending the parents' custody, Oakland County Juvenile Referee Karla Mallett cited the Nebraska abandonment and the prosecutor's petition, which described several examples of neglect and physical abuse.

"You don't get to do that to a child," she said about the abandonment. "It is not a humane society for animals. He is a child."

Mallett asked the mother what type of message the abandonment sent to the boy's 10-year-old brother, who might now worry that he, too, would be surrendered if he misbehaved.

"You are a mother," she said. "You parent that child until that child is raised and that child is grown."

The mother held her chin in her hand and pursed her lips as Mallett removed her custody. The father showed no emotion. The Detroit News isn't naming them to protect the identity of the youth.

Pending the trial, for which a pretrial hearing was scheduled for Nov. 7, the children will be moved to the home of a relative or foster parents.

Before Mallett's decision, the father's attorney argued that all the children but the abandoned one should stay with the father pending the trial.

"What about (the abandoned boy)?" asked Mallett.

The mother's attorney, Alan Byrd, suggested the youngster has behavioral problems that the family couldn't control and are better treated by counseling.

"We want what is best for (the abandoned boy)," said Byrd. "We feel that it's sad and unfortunate."

After the hearing, Byrd said the boy had caused a lot of stress and trauma in the home, but wouldn't elaborate until the trial.

The prosecutor's petition, which includes information from health and adoption agencies, describes parents who were afraid of losing their three children as they made efforts to get rid of the fourth:

In 1999, one year after the abandoned boy was adopted by the couple, relatives of the mother told state health workers that she no longer wanted him but was afraid that, if the boy was returned, authorities would remove a 1-year-old who had been adopted at the same time.

In 2004, the mother tried to contact the boy's biological family to ask them to take him, the family told the adoption agency. The mother said she didn't want to arrange the move through the health officials because they might then prevent her from adopting more children.

When the adopted boy was discovered with a black eye and fat lip two years later, the mother worried that she would lose her other three children if health workers discovered the abuse, according to the petition.

The mother's fears about losing her other children apparently continued Monday when she dropped off the 13-year-old at a hospital in Omaha, Neb. The state has a law that allows children in danger to be surrendered without the parent being charged with abandonment.

After learning that Omaha Police had become involved in the abandonment, the mother had a sudden change of heart, according to the petition and Nebraska officials. She told hospital staffers the episode had taught her son a lesson and that she wanted to retrieve him.

To Nebraska health workers, she played down the boy's behavioral problems, saying they amounted to nothing more than refusing to do his homework and talking in class.

But it was too late to undo what she had done.

Under Nebraska's safe haven law, once a child is abandoned, local prosecutors and the state health agency investigate to determine whether the child should remain under parental custody.

The investigation then triggered the one in Michigan that could eventually lead to the couple losing all of their children. The boy, who was placed in an emergency shelter, is due back in Michigan on Monday.

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October 18, 2008

Mom of abandoned teen in court

Nov. 7 hearing set in custody of other kids

BY MEGHA SATYANARAYANA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The mother of the 13-year-old Southfield boy abandoned this week in Nebraska made her first appearance in court Friday as she and her husband battle to get back custody of their other three children.

Teri Martin, 38, showed no emotion as Oakland County family court referee Karla Mallett ruled that neither Martin nor her husband, Terrence Martin, 39, will have custody of any of the children at least until a Nov. 7 hearing on a neglect petition filed Wednesday.

At that hearing, the state is expected to move to terminate the parental rights to the 13-year-old while continuing to keep the other children in foster care.

The abandonment case may change Nebraska's expansive and controversial safe haven law and could set legal precedence in Michigan for what can happen to parents who take children over state lines to abandon them.

"You don't get to do that to a child. You're a mother. You parent that child till that child is raised, till that child is grown," Mallett said "It's not a humane society for animals; he's a child. You can't take him there and say you'll come back for him when he's fixed."

Martin left her son at an Omaha hospital with \$10 and luggage at 1:30 a.m. Monday before returning to the area sometime Thursday. The child told police his mother was stressed out and left him to teach him a lesson.

Nebraska officials said Martin showed remorse for leaving the child, but court papers tell a story of a child she never wanted.

Terrence Martin said in the petition that he and his wife were "railroaded" into adopting the boy out of foster care when he was about 4 years old, so that they could adopt his infant brother.

The Martins repeatedly tried to rescind their adoption of the boy, claiming he had emotional problems. But court records suggest the Martins did little, if anything, to seek help for the child's behavioral issues.

His middle school officials said he was within normal behavior for a teen.

"Not one contact to the court for help," Mallett said during the hearing. "We get calls, 10 a week, for assistance for child behavior. That call was not made by you."

Also in the petition was Teri Martin's admission that she did not want her adopted sons, but feared the loss of her other children if she tried to give them back.

The Martins will get weekly visitation with the three children in state custody in Michigan. The 13-year-old is still in Nebraska, at an emergency shelter, awaiting a court decision to send him back to Michigan.

The Martins denied requests for interviews with the Free Press, but Teri Martin's lawyer, Alan Byrd,

said, "This is round one. There's another side to the story. There is a lot of trauma and friction in the home."

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Saturday, October 18, 2008

Marney Rich Keenan: Home Life

Don't be so quick to judge parents who dropped off kids



While nothing seems so egregious that would warrant a parent abandoning a child, as in the Southfield mother who left her 13-year-old son at an Omaha, Neb., hospital, we might want to withhold judgment until all the facts are in.

On the surface, it would appear that the mother -- at 1:30 a.m. -- left her son at a hospital as if she were returning defective merchandise, seemingly no better than a dog taken back to the pound because the animal couldn't be trained.

Police said the mother told them she needed to take advantage of Nebraska's safe haven law -- which allows children to be surrendered to hospitals without parents or guardians being charged with neglect or abandonment -- because she couldn't handle the stress of taking care of him anymore. She left him alone at the hospital with luggage, extra clothes and \$10, authorities said.

Now the case has also come under the legal microscope of officials here in Oakland County who have recently reported their suspicions that the boy has been abused.

But a closer look at the other parental abandonment cases in Nebraska focuses attention on the plight of beleaguered parents. It just might be that they are not failing their children as much as we are failing them.

While the Nebraska safe haven law began in July as a safeguard to protect abandoned babies, the word "child" has been interpreted, rightly or wrongly, to mean anyone under the age of 18. Meanwhile, kids are becoming wards of the state of Nebraska with no more effort than it takes to transport them to the nearest hospital or police station.

The state's largest newspaper, the Omaha World Herald reports this: Since the state's safe haven law took effect three months ago, 18 children, ages 1 to 17 (two are from out of state) have been left, given up, dropped off, dumped, abandoned, surrendered -- however you want to put it -- by parents who said they could no longer take care of them.

Now there's a lot of hemming and hawing among state officials over exactly what age was intended to be the cut-off point. A state legislature hearing on the issue is scheduled for November.

In the meantime, everybody is playing the blame game. Social services experts are fuming about giving an out to parents of out-of-control teenagers. Others fear parents on the verge of abusing their children might be discouraged from seeking help if they risked prosecution. Child advocates warn of the life-long damage abandonment has on a kid's psyche. And parents are vilified for giving up on their own flesh and blood.

A recent examination by the Omaha World Herald shows how desperate the situations have become.

Nine of the children were siblings from one family (ages 20 months to 17) surrendered by the father, 36, who had recently been widowed and lost his job.

The remaining six children were ages 11 to 15, and all came from separate families.

Here's a sampling: A 15-year-old boy was left at the hospital by his grandmother/guardian who said he was kicked out of his six-hour-a day psychiatric treatment program for stealing and breaking things. His prescribed medication did nothing: he punched holes in plaster walls and broke all the mirrors in the house. "It was like sending a lion home with nothing to tame him," his grandmother said. A 13-year-old girl with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder was surrendered by her great-aunt after she smeared menstrual blood all over the walls of the house, and tried to jump out of moving car. Previously, the aunt took her out of a medical facility because she said they sedated and abused her.

An aunt with custody of five of her sisters' children, after her sister died of lupus, turned in the youngest child, an 11-year old boy, reporting disobedience, anger problems and possible gang involvement. She said she could have gotten help for him if he had committed a crime, but "I didn't want him to have a record. I wanted help for him so when he hits 18, he's not a menace to society."

The parents said they did not view their actions as abandoning their kids, but as a means to get help. Even if that meant they could no longer have custody, they said it was better than getting shuttled from provider to provider or not getting help because they didn't have health insurance, or being told the state could not step in until the child had committed a crime or was found to be abused or neglected. How about that for being in between a rock and a hard place?

Now that Metro Detroit has choked up it first safe haven applicant, we can no longer claim to be so naïve to think tragedies like these only happen in Nebraska. What's really scary is when abandonment of kids starts sounding like an option, rather than a last resort.

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Saturday, October 18, 2008

Laura Berman: Commentary

Search for 'safe haven' is a clear failure of the good mother test



Little in the tale of a Southfield mother who dumped her 13-year-old son in a Nebraska hospital last weekend inspires sympathy.

As Karla Mallett, the Oakland County Circuit Court referee in the case, dryly put it: The mother's decision "is not good parenting." Even if the law in Nebraska says you can, a mother can't just quit; she's expected to love and cherish her children, to sacrifice and endure.

Instead, this mother, who sat stolidly through a court hearing Friday without displaying any emotion, failed the good mother test in a public and profound way. Whatever is true and not true about the son in question, the mother is being paraded in our 21st century media town square.

She not only punished and abandoned one child, she savaged the very idea of family. Now the three remaining children -- ages 3, 5, and 10 -- understand with chilling certainty the price of misbehavior: You simply disappear.

Bad parents abound in our society, and even good parents have their bad moments, but we're always hungry for new twists on this old theme.

In the courtroom, I overheard a reporter remembering the day her own mother, frustrated and upset, went thumbing through the Yellow Pages under O, as in "orphanage."

Another side to the story?

Lawyer Cheryl Carpenter, who defended a social worker who left her incorrigible son at a Redford Township Police station, argues that safe haven laws are supposed to be instruments of compassion, not tools for prosecutors. "Isn't it better to leave a child in the hospital than perpetrate an act of violence?" she asks. "Isn't that what a safe haven law is for?"

Deborah Carley, the deputy Oakland County prosecutor who is a fierce and able advocate for children, pointed to signs of abuse and neglect, including some record of physical abuse, and the parents' failure to follow through with therapy for the 13-year-old boy over the last six months.

I don't know this family, and the mother's lawyer, Alan Byrd, would say only that there is another side of this

story, that the mother "was under a lot of stress."

The family's house, a four-bedroom tri-level, looks well-furnished and neatly tended in real estate ads. Both parents are out of work now, though, and they offered no insights in court to their thought process.

Unanswered questions

But a Department of Human services caseworker described a more chaotic and desperate scene: A house stripped of most furniture, belongings packed, mattresses on the floor. No one could explain why.

In this time of fragile economics and fraying emotions, the Southfield mom who drove all night to Nebraska raises many unanswered questions. She drove all night chasing a horizon, seeking "a safe haven," that, when you think about it, isn't part of being a mom.

You can reach Laura Berman at (248) 647-7221 or lberman@detnews.com.

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October 17, 2008

Mom who left child in Nebraska returns, faces neglect allegations

By MEGHA SATYANARAYANA
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

The Southfield woman who left her adopted teen son in Nebraska because she said she couldn't handle him anymore appeared in court this afternoon to face neglect allegations that have at least temporarily cost her and her husband custody of all of their children.

The parents face a Nov. 7 pretrial hearing, Oakland County family court referee Karla Mallett ordered this afternoon. The state will move at the next hearing to terminate the family's parental rights to the teen left at an Omaha hospital earlier this week – a child both parents said in affidavits that they did not want.

The Free Pres is not identifying the parents because no criminal charges have been filed against them in the case.

The state will also seek to keep his three siblings in temporary foster care, where they have been since Thursday. Mallett did allow weekly, supervised visitation for the parents with the other children.

The hearing marked the first court appearance of the mother, who said she has been back in metro Detroit since Thursday. She said in an affidavit that she feared her decision to give away their son was that she and her husband could lose custody of their other children.

Nebraska's safe haven law allows parents to leave a child up to 17 years of age at a hospital without fear of prosecution for abandonment.

The petition filed Wednesday by the Oakland County Prosecutor's Office outlines several apparent marks of abuse against the 13-year-old, including burns on his chest and hands and scars on his body. The petition said the father did nothing to stop the abuse, and the mother's family knew the abuse was happening.

The petition reported the mother knew the 13-year-old had behavioral issues and was supposed to be on medication. The child missed multiple mental health appointments. At one time, the parents tried to rescind the adoption but worried about losing their biological children. The father said they felt "railroaded" into adopting the 13-year-old in order to get the 10-year-old sibling, who was a baby at the time.

The 13-year-old is still in Nebraska, but is expected to return to Michigan in the next few days. Contact MEGHA SATYANARAYANA at 313-223-4544 or megha@freepress.com.

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Nebraska's Safe Haven Law Questioned

Oct. 19, 2008

(CBS) In the past decade, all 50 states have passed some kind of "safe haven" law that permits the parents or guardians of newborns to turn over children to the state by literally dropping them off at a hospital or a police station.

The movement has saved more than 1,000 children, according to the National Safe Haven Alliance. But when Nebraska became the last state to adopt a safe haven law this year, it led to some unintended consequences, reports **CBS News correspondent Kelly Wallace**.

The flurry of young children - and teenagers - dropped off at hospitals and police stations caught Nebraska officials by surprise, 18 since the law took effect three months ago. One overwhelmed Nebraska widower dropped off nine kids ranging from 20 months to 17-years-old. Then, grandparents of a 14-year-old from Iowa and a Michigan mother of an adopted 13-year-old left the children at Omaha hospitals.

"The law needs to be changed," says Todd Landry, director of the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services. "We need to get back to the intent of the law, and the intent of the law was always the protection of newborns in immediate danger of being harmed."

Nebraska's safe haven law is the only one in the nation that doesn't set an age limit. For example, 15 states accept infants up to 3-days-old. Fourteen states set the age limit at one-month-old, and only two states accept children up to a year old.

"These were laws that were put in place to try and prevent infanticide and to address the tragedies where a parent feels she has no alternative but to abandon her child in a trash can," says Mary Lee Allen, of the Children's Defense Fund.

But the laws don't always prevent those tragedies, **Wallace** reports. One week ago in Maryland, a day-old baby was discovered in a black bag abandoned in a field. She died.

Safe haven laws generally promise parents or guardians anonymity and no criminal charges, as long as the child hasn't been abused. The head of child welfare in New Jersey, where infants up to a month old are accepted, says those rules are essential.

"Our motto is 'no shame, no blame, no names'," says Kimberly Ricketts, commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Children and Families. "Since enactment of the law in August of 2000, we have had 37 safe surrenders."

In Nebraska, state legislators are planning to amend the law.

"We need to look at, you know, what we can do for these older children other than having them dropped off at the hospital," says Arnie Stuthman, a state senator.

Child advocates say government can provide more services for families without health insurance or whose insurance lacks mental health coverage.

"These are children with serious behavioral and emotional problems who need mental health treatment," Allen said. "One out of five children in this country has an unmet mental health need, and about only one in five of those children get any sort of treatment."

Nebraska's Department of Health and Human Services says 16 of the dropped off children remain in state custody and are receiving a variety of treatment in foster care and other residential settings.

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Safe Haven Teen Headed Home

The 13 year old Michigan boy was abandoned at an Omaha Hospital by his family last week.

Saturday, October 18, 2008

The teen was left at Creighton University Medical Center on October 13, under Nebraska's safe haven law and will be returning to Michigan in the near future to the custody of the Michigan Department of Human Services.

"I appreciate the assistance and cooperation of the Michigan Department of Human Services so this youth can safely return to his home state," said Todd Landry, Director of the Division of Children and Family Services in the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

The Michigan agency completed an evaluation and assessment of the family situation and a Michigan court has ordered the child be placed into their custody. The couple's other three children have also been removed from the home.

The Douglas County Attorney's office and Douglas County Juvenile Court judge determined his return to Michigan would be in the child's best interest. A Nebraska DHHS employee will accompany the youth on his return to Michigan.



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The Washington Times

Concerns remain with adoption act

Cheryl Wetzstein

Sunday, October 19, 2008

Amid the politicking and financial fights, Congress actually passed a significant piece of legislation for troubled families in September.

It affects you, for instance, if you have been thinking about taking in your messed-up sister's kids. Under the "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008," which President Bush signed Oct. 7, you can more easily become their paid legal guardian. Other changes allow states to keep critical services flowing to foster youths until they turn 21 and letting tribal governments get child-welfare funds directly. (Previously, states pulled the plug on a lot of foster kids on their 18th birthdays, and a lot of tribes didn't take the funds because they had to go through state bureaucracies.)

I have some lingering concerns, but first some accolades for the new law.

"This is the most significant legislation relating to adoption and foster care since the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997," said Tom Atwood, president and chief executive of the National Council for Adoption.

He and other adoption advocates are happy states will continue to get (even bigger) bonuses if they increase the number of adoptions from foster care each year.

Adoption advocates also are pleased that states will be required to tell all prospective adoptive parents about the \$11,650 adoption tax credit. (Before, not all parents were told about the credit, especially if they were adopting foster children). Also, within a few years, all children adopted from foster care who have special needs will be eligible for federal adoption assistance. (Currently, only foster children adopted from poor families come with subsidies.)

Over at the Pew Charitable Trusts and Kids Are Waiting campaign, child-welfare leaders are glad more adults who agree to be legal guardians of young relatives can get federal subsidies similar to foster parents. In the past, kinship-care guardians got far less or nothing at all. All of these new policies "will help judges and other professionals ensure that more abused and neglected children can leave foster care to join safe, loving homes," said Michigan State Supreme Court Justice Maura Corrigan, a member of the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, which made key policy recommendations to Congress.

Here are my thoughts. I understand the merits of kinship care, and I see the built-in safeguards in the law to make sure relatives are fit and willing. I still wonder, however, about the wisdom of paying families to take care of their own relatives. It seems like it opens a Pandora's box a little wider. After all, wouldn't everyone like to get some financial help to raise their kids?

I also worry about oversight of kinship families, especially in light of the checkered track record of (overworked, underpaid) child-welfare workers. Will the kinship agreement cause a family rift? Will the troubled parent keep on drugging and drinking because the kids are safe with family? If Grandma becomes the legal guardian, will she let her daughter (or son) take the kids just because she (or he) shows up sober?



Cheryl Wetzstein

I also am perplexed about states getting bonuses for increasing the numbers of adoptions of foster kids each year. When the bonus policy was created in 1997, there was an admitted "backlog" of thousands of cases where the kids were free for adoption but still sat in foster care. That backlog is virtually gone, so why is the goal still "more" adoptions each year from foster care? (Most foster kids return to their homes, by the way.)

I would think the foremost priority would be preventing kids from entering foster care - which is why we already spend serious money educating young people on (a) how to avoid drugs, unwed pregnancy and gangs, (b) how to have competent relationships, marriages and family life, and (c) where to get family preservation services when needed.

I raise these concerns, not because I think this new law is mistaken, or policies such as kinship care or adoption are wrong, or that good people aren't doing the best they can. I just worry about those unintended consequences. It always seems that when adults make mistakes, the kids end up paying the price.

- Cheryl Wetzstein can be reached at [cwetzstein@ washingtontimes.com](mailto:cwetzstein@washingtontimes.com)

Latest News



THE BAY CITY TIMES

League of Women voter guide available

Posted by [alpayne](#) October 20, 2008 08:32AM

The League of Women Voters of Michigan Nonpartisan Voter Guide for the Nov. 4 general election is now available at public libraries and county offices of the Department of Human Services statewide. An online version also is available at www.MichiganVoterPower.org.

The guide provides information about Michigan candidates for U.S. Senate, U.S. House of Representatives, Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, State Board of Education, and the university boards for University of Michigan, Michigan State University and Wayne State University.

It also includes the ballot language and pro/con statements for the two statewide proposals.

The guide contains verbatim responses from candidates.

"We hope Michigan voters will be informed voters and one way to learn about the candidates' views and background is through our voter guide," said Jessica Reiser, president of the League of Women Voters of Michigan.



October 18, 2008

Summit shows push to keep Michigan kids in school

Programs see success with fresh approaches

BY LORI HIGGINS

FREE PRESS EDUCATION WRITER

For a couple of hundred students in Michigan each year, the only path to a diploma runs through a residential military-style school in Battle Creek run by the Michigan National Guard.

For dozens in Westwood Community Schools in Dearborn Heights, the key to graduating last year was an alternative program that let them make up lost credits in exchange for signing pledges that they would get the work done.

These turnarounds don't happen enough in a state where more than 20,000 students -- enough to fill 20 average-size high schools -- abandon their education every year.

Some critics say too little attention had been paid to the crisis. But schools have become more aggressive than ever in finding solutions, and one of the largest efforts to address it culminates in a summit Monday in Lansing, where more than 500 people are to share ideas on keeping kids in school.

The summit builds on the findings of 11 hearings held over the past six months. Organizers of those hearings -- including the Michigan Education Association, Michigan's Children and Michigan's Charter Schools -- found common themes in the testimony: Adults need to build better relationships with teens; schools must intervene before kids reach high school; schools need a variety of approaches to helping kids, and community groups must be more involved.

The conversations about the crisis couldn't be happening at a more important time. Michigan is suffering economically and counting on public schools to produce graduates who will be ready to take on the jobs of the future.

"The schools that should be addressing this issue seriously are not," said Sharif Shakrani, codirector of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University. "And the schools that do not have a problem with graduation rates and dropout rates are paying more attention."

James Heffelbower, 17, a senior at Belleville High School, could have been one of the statistics. He failed nearly every class he took as a high school freshman. But the adults in his life believed in his potential, enough to keep him from spiraling toward life as a dropout.

"Without that motivation, I wouldn't be where I am," said James, who now expects to graduate on time.

"Kids need positive role models. They need to feel worthwhile and that they are cared about," said Erin Radtka, a guidance counselor at Belleville High whom James credits with getting him on track academically and helping him find a stable home after bouncing through the foster care system.

Students held accountable

In just about every hearing held in advance of Monday's summit, organizers heard from previously frustrated parents who had nearly given up on their teens until they heard about the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy.

Since 1999, the program in Battle Creek has succeeded by using a strict military-type approach in which students wear uniforms, take a demanding course load and receive a heavy dose of discipline, structure and routine -- things sorely lacking in many of their lives.

Vicki Lashuay of Ash Township in Monroe County was a frustrated parent. After her daughter found success in the program, she made it her mission to educate other parents about the option.

"The kids we have now ... they need a chance. One less dropout is one less person that will turn to crime," Lashuay said.

The academy, one of 30 operating nationwide, puts youths ages 16 to 19 through a 22-week residential program during which they earn 4.5 academic credits and some college credit. Some of the students leave the program and return to their traditional high schools. Most receive general equivalency diplomas.

The academy monitors the students for a year after they graduate from the program, and the statistics show that after that year, nine out of 10 are either working, in school or in the military.

Retired Army Col. John Wemlinger, commandant of cadets, said the program works for two reasons: Students volunteer to enroll, and it's so disciplined.

"Our students are held to a strict standard of accountability," Wemlinger said.

Fund hoped to boost graduation

One of the more ambitious plans to turn around metro Detroit schools with low graduation rates is to gain momentum this month when up to a half dozen schools are selected to receive planning grants from the Greater Detroit Venture Fund.

The months-old campaign, created by the United Way of Southeast Michigan, the Skillman Foundation and AT&T, aims to raise \$10 million a year to fund the improvement of low-performing schools during a 5-year period, said Michael Tenbusch, vice president of educational preparedness at the United Way. The plans would be focused on improving graduation rates from 60% and below to at least 80%.

The money would help the schools hire a so-called turnaround specialist -- an organization with a successful track record -- to help transform the schools. And while the selected schools can choose any method to make the transformation, the goal is for them to break into smaller chunks to create a more personalized environment, Tenbusch said. Students who feel connected, experts say, are more likely to stay in school.

Van Dyke Public Schools in Warren is banking on those kinds of connections. The district's Lincoln High School officially has a 71% graduation rate but is one of 30 in metro Detroit eligible for the Venture Fund grant based on a Johns Hopkins study last year that put its graduation rate at 39%. The district applied for the grant, went through an interview process earlier this month and is now awaiting an announcement.

The goal, said Donn Tignanelli, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, is to create smaller environments at Lincoln.

"We know that we have some challenges. And we want to tackle them firsthand," Tignanelli said.

Flexible schooling gets attention

There is evidence that new twists on traditional alternative programs can work. A relatively new effort in Westwood Community Schools, for example, has succeeded primarily on the strength of agreements signed by students and their parents that say the kids promise to come to class, complete their work and follow the rules.

It operates similar to most alternative programs, yet in its first year, it graduated 37 students who had

been far behind in credits and not expected to get a diploma.

The district contracted with a national organization, Educational Services of America, to run the program. It is computer-based, with students working independently with assistance from teachers. Students are required to be in school for four hours and 15 minutes daily, though the times are flexible, with the school open as early as 7 a.m. and as late as 8:30 p.m.

"These are kids who ... would have been out on the streets," Westwood Superintendent Ernie Minghine said. "Now I have 37 people who are going to be members of this community and will be outstanding individuals."

The results have officials with the Wayne Regional Educational Service Agency, the intermediate school district that serves Wayne County, looking for ways to replicate it county-wide. The program had a waiting list going into the beginning of this school year.

Minghine said the program is working in ways other attempts to provide alternative programs have not. Key to the success, he said, is the buy-in it gets from both students and parents.

Rigorous requirements criticized

But even with the renewed efforts, there is still concern that students grappling with the state's tough new graduation requirements will make the dropout crisis more acute.

Nicole Laubert feared her son, a sophomore at Dakota High School in Macomb Township, was on track to drop out. He had excelled through elementary and middle school, but as a freshman he was among the first students to face the new mandates, which include a heavier dose of more rigorous math courses.

Laubert's son struggled in algebra, eventually failed and was forced to retake a portion of the class in summer school. Math had never been a strong subject for him, and the additional time spent on algebra hurt his other classes.

"He was just losing interest. He didn't want to do anything," said Laubert of St. Clair Shores.

Laubert, who hired private tutors and bought supplemental materials to help her son, said the best way to prevent dropouts is for the state to rethink what she considers to be unrealistic requirements for students. Barring that, she said, schools must provide more tutoring for students like her son during and after the school day.

James, the 17-year-old from Belleville High, has had every reason to give up over the years. A foster child since age 5, he has lived in more than a dozen homes and attributes his freshman struggles to having been removed from a home he wanted to be in just weeks before the beginning of the school year.

Just about every time James moved, he'd find himself in a new school. The transitions were always difficult, and each time it got a little easier to want to give up, he said.

Support from adults has been crucial.

Radtko, the school counselor, worked hard to find a home that would help James stay in the district because she feared what would happen if he had to leave the high school.

"I was adamant ... that he not have to move again," she said.

She also helped him get connected with a national program that would allow him to take classes online to rebuild the credit he had lost. But it wasn't just her. James said all of his teachers have reached out in ways that he hopes other students experience.

"They saw me as an individual, not just 'Oh, he's just one of my students.' They saw me as James."

James is planning to go to college and is considering a career as a teacher or social worker.

"I would be passionate about my job. I would remember how tough it was for me and remember that other kids go through the same thing. I would definitely do everything in my power to help them succeed."

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Feeding the masses: Ministry 'a bargain and blessing' for those needing to stretch food dollars

by Mary L. Lawrence | The Saginaw News
Sunday October 19, 2008, 12:37 AM

Heat, food and shelter are the basics of life, but even those are getting more difficult to come by.

With the present economic downturn, mid-Michigan families are looking for ways to save money, especially when it comes to buying groceries. Georgia-based Angel Food offers supermarket-quality meats, produce and other staples at more than a 50 percent discount to anyone who wants to stretch their food dollars.



Melanie Sochan | The Saginaw News
Parishioners on Patrol, Peace Lutheran Church and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans conducted the second "Convoy of Hope" free food distribution on Friday at Stone Elementary School, 1006 State in Saginaw. In the background people line up for food.

"I just showed a relative how much food we got," said Kenyatta Wade of Saginaw, a single mom of three children about her \$30 purchase. "It will probably last a little longer than week."

The ministry feeds more than 350,000 families a month in 35 states. That includes Michigan, where about 245 churches are involved. About a dozen Saginaw, Bay and Midland county churches participate, serving as distribution centers and operating on volunteer power while feeding hundreds of families and hoping to expand their reach to thousands.

Anyone of any income, family size or background can participate; and families with greater needs can buy more than one box of food.

Feeding frugal families

Shrinking incomes is an issue Saginaw County residents know all too well, as major layoffs idle workers and the up-and-down prices of gasoline and rising cost of food break budgets.

Angel Food is open to anyone, unlike many efforts that require proof of income. Across mid-Michigan, people are seeking relief.

Pam Cole, director of the East Side Soup Kitchen, 940 E. Genesee, said the kitchen served 313 people Wednesday, a number more typical for the end of the month when funds are tight for low-income citizens. She said they serve as many as 500 residents per day during the summer when children are home from school.

"People can come in and get a meal, and we don't ask any questions," said Cole. The kitchen serves lunches Monday through Friday.



Melanie Sochan | The Saginaw News
Alesia D. Strickland, 40, of Saginaw, a parishoner at Greater Coleman Temple Church of God and Christ volunteers her time filling food boxes at the "Convoy of Hope" free food distribution on Friday at Stone Elementary School, 1006 State in Saginaw.

Parishioners on Patrol, Peace Lutheran Church and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans distributed food Friday to the needy at Stone Elementary School in Saginaw. In August, the groups distributed more than 21,530 pounds of edibles to 700 people.

Meeting the need

About 36,639 Michigan residents receive food subsidies. Randy Barst, director of the Saginaw County Department of Human Services, said the county spends nearly \$43.2 million annually on food assistance and 36,639 people countywide receive food subsidies.

Add in the struggling middle class, and you've got a lot of hungry people.

"People throughout the country are struggling to make ends meet," said Doug Metcalf, director of media and marketing for Angel Food Ministries. "They're trying to stay on budget by stretching food dollars wherever they can."

For the past two years about 50 people have taken advantage of the food ministry at New Mount Calvary Missionary Baptist Church on Saginaw's South Side.

"With about 20 volunteers it works beautifully," said Willie Haynes of Saginaw, the church's site director.

"It's quality food, and you get twice as much for the money," said Haynes, a former Saginaw councilman. "With the economy the way it is now, if you can save a dollar, it's needed. This ministry is both a bargain and blessing."

History

Angel Food Ministries is similar to food co-ops popular in the 1960s and '70s but without the work commitment. It's also reminiscent of the federal government's food commodities distribution, but it's not free and there are no income limits to participate.

Headquartered in Monroe, Ga., the Rev. Joseph Wingo, pastor of Emmanuel Praise Church, and his wife, Linda, founded Angel Food in 1994 to help people in their neighborhood.

Volume buying enables the ministry to price food economically. Each month the ministry distributes half-a-million boxes of beef, chicken, vegetables and other staples.

"When you need half-a-million chickens the suppliers are more than willing to give you some deep discounts," said Doug Metcalf, director of media and marketing for Angel Food Ministries.

It is one of a few ministries that the U.S. Department of Agriculture allows to accept food stamps.

"We work with the USDA, but we're a totally self-sustaining ministry," Metcalf said. "Of course the USDA loves what we do, because food stamp recipients double their buying power."

How it works

For \$30, people who place orders with a participating organization receive a variety of foods -- top sirloin steaks, boneless chicken breast, ground turkey, stir fry vegetables, french fries, pinto beans, eggs -- that is enough food to feed a family of four for about a week.

Ministry officials say the cost of the food at supermarkets would equal approximately \$65. Additionally, for \$28 they offer senior citizens 10 nutritionally balanced, fully cooked heat-and-serve dinners.

Once the food arrives at local churches, typically the last Saturday of the month, volunteers staff the monthly customer pick ups.

Single mom Wade said food distribution at the end of the month is timely.

"The end of the month is usually when you're low on food and money," she said. "You get a lot of food for \$30. I grilled the steaks already, and they were so tender and really good."



Melanie Sochan | The Saginaw NewsRina S. Watt, 30, of Saginaw, left pushes son Zach Watt, 1, son of Robert Watt, Aimee L. Gath, 21, center and Billy D. Stacy,, 26, of Saginaw pick up free food at the "Convoy of Hope" free food distribution on Friday at Stone Elementary School, 1006 State in Saginaw.

Special delivery

Saginaw Valley Church of the Nazarene, 1815 Tittabawassee in Carrollton Township, is a distribution site.

Cindy Letzkus, Angel Food director at the church said the congregation provides food to up to 150 families monthly since July 2007. Church volunteers use a trailer and the church van to take delivery at Gratiot County's St. Louis Church the Nazarene. Other mid-Michigan churches utilize a pick-up site in Midland.

"We were looking for something to do to help out the community," Letzkus said. Her vision is to grow the ministry at her church to as many as 1,000 participants.

Metcalf said the food is top quality products, not donated food. Each month the organization focuses on providing a nutritious, protein-rich selection.

"Families on a budget usually eliminate good cuts of meat first. We provide them with some good quality meat as well as frozen vegetables," he said.

Passing it on

Metcalf said Angel Food donates \$1 for each box purchased to the host site to help with benevolent projects.

Haynes said New Mount Calvary donates five boxes of food each month to needy families. Volunteers deliver food boxes to registered participants if they don't have transportation.

"We're trying to be a blessing to the community," Haynes said. "I would like to grow participation at our church to as many as 500. Our volunteers could handle that."

Dave Hitchcock, who with his wife, Jenn, are Angel Food host site directors at First Baptist Church in Midland, said the church tries to give away three boxes of food per month.

The 200-member congregation joined the ministry in March with 15 participants. That number has grown to more than 80.

"We're in an area that has a good opportunity for outreach to nearby low income families," Dave Hitchcock said.

"Participation is across the board," he said. "It runs the gamut. People with Bridge Cards for food stamps, low income people, those in our congregation who want to stretch their food budgets and senior citizens all take advantage of the ministry," he said.



Jay Barton of St. Joseph addresses the crowd Friday at the Salvation Army in Benton Harbor. At left is Ismael Ahmed, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services. In center is Jerry Frank, director of Berrien County Department of Human Services.

Photos by John Madill / H-P staff

BENTON HARBOR

Fighting poverty

Officials discuss strategies to help put poor people to work

By JULIE SWIDWA

Herald-Palladium Staff Writer

Oct. 18, 2008

BENTON HARBOR — Many Americans are just one layoff, one illness or one injury away from poverty. Jay Barton of St. Joseph attested to that at an event Friday at the Salvation Army. The event, attended by about 120 people, was a prelude to the Poverty Summit Nov. 13 in Detroit. There, policy makers, poor people and service providers from across the state will talk about strategies to fight poverty and put people to work.

Barton, 37, began working as a teenager and was a typical middle class worker with years of solid work experience before losing his job at Gast Manufacturing in a 2007 restructuring.

Around the same time, his wife was diagnosed with cancer. He cashed out his retirement fund and took any temporary job he could find. Eventually, still out of steady work, he borrowed money from his parents and in-laws.

"The whole family suffers. I didn't ever want my kids to see that side of life," Barton said. "It turns out anybody can be down in that hole."

He turned to the Department of Human Services for help and attended a Jobs, Education and Training

program through Michigan Works! and now is working full-time driving a truck for Kirsh Carton, based in Benton Harbor.

Barton was one of several speakers at Friday's meeting, along with Art Fenrick, director of the Southwest Michigan Community Action Agency; 'I had to put groceries back when I went through the line, because I had underestimated.'

Todd Gustafson, director of Michigan Works! of Berrien, Cass and Van Buren counties; Jerry Frank, director of the Berrien County Department of Human Services; and Ismael Ahmed, director of the Michigan DHS.

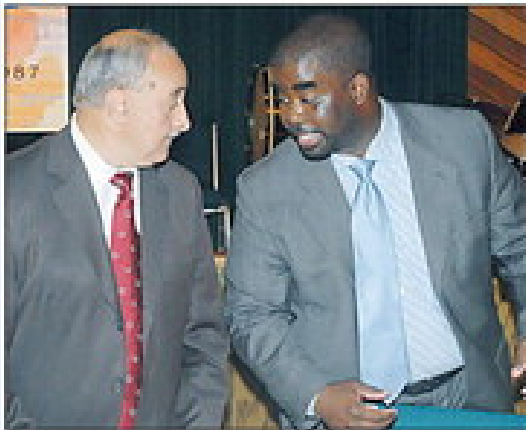
Edward Woods III, director of communications for the state DHS, also attended. He previously was director of Michigan Works! in Benton Harbor. To help raise awareness about poverty, Woods participated this week in the Michigan Food Stamp Challenge, along with 300 other people around the state.

Woods and the others were allowed to spend just \$5.87 a day, or \$29.35 for five days, on groceries. Meanwhile, his wife and two children ate like normal.

"It was hard. I definitely saw a different side of things," Woods said. "I'm used to a variety of food. I had to really plan, and I ate the same thing most days, usually sandwiches. I had to plan more time in the morning to pack my lunch."

According to a grocery receipt, Woods spent \$25 at Wal-mart to buy cereal, cheese, soy milk, lunch meat, punch, Miracle Whip, bread and a bag of Trail Mix.

He said that after his groceries were rung up and his Bridge Card was swiped, the cashier yelled out, "You have \$4.35 left on your Bridge Card."



Ismael Ahmed, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services (left) talks with Edward Woods III, director of communications for DHS.

The Bridge Card is used like a credit card, except that money is put on the card every month by the DHS. The card takes the place of the old food stamp system.

"It was hard. I realized how blessed I am and how much I have to be thankful for," Woods said. He said the average Bridge Card user is on the program for nine months.

Frank said most of the people who are living in poverty work but just don't make enough money to live on. Ismael also took part in the Food Stamp Challenge, which ended today. He said his family of four normally spends about \$100 a person for five days.

"I had to put groceries back when I went through the line, because I had underestimated. I had tried to count every item and add it up as I went," Ismael said.

"Then at the counter I couldn't get my Bridge Card to work. The cashier told me I should see my case worker."

Ismael said the goal of the upcoming summit in Detroit is to begin planning for how to cut poverty in half within 10 years.

He expects at least 3,000 people to attend.

"We want our communities to be there to be represented. Poverty is different in different communities," he said.

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October 18, 2008

State officials taste life on food stamps

BY MELANIE D. SCOTT
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Grocery shopping became a whole new experience for Ismael Ahmed.

The director of Michigan's Department of Human Services tried to do something nearly 1.3 million Michigan residents do every month -- feed themselves on \$5.87 a day.

Ahmed and his wife, Margaret, lived on food stamps for five days as part of an initiative to raise public awareness of the challenges and perceptions of those who participate daily in the federal food stamp program.

The Dearborn couple joined about 300 state leaders, including Gov. Jennifer Granholm and executives such as United Way President and Chief Executive Officer Michael Brennan, in taking the Michigan Food Stamp Challenge.

For one week, participants spent a total of \$29.35 for food or meals -- the equivalent of \$5.87 a day.

The challenge began Monday and ended Friday.

"We had to be very specific about what we were going to buy," Ahmed said Friday. "We normally go to the store and buy whatever we want, and we eat out a lot. As we shopped, we realized things cost more than we thought."

For dinner, Ahmed bought chicken in the bargain section of a grocery store.

For lunch it was peanut butter sandwiches.

"I wanted to buy cheese, and it was really a struggle. One was \$5 a pound and another was \$8 a pound," Ahmed said. "I decided to buy 12 slices of the \$8 cheese."

Supplies dwindle quickly

Ahmed said he soon discovered that money and food quickly ran out. By Thursday, Ahmed had run out of bread for sandwiches.

"I did this for a week, but 1.3 million Michigan residents are still struggling, and this is the big point," Ahmed said. "We take so much for granted and often forget about many others who are working two jobs but still don't have enough for food."

For Granholm, who participated with her family, it was about choices, said Liz Boyd, her spokeswoman.

"It's choosing between buying a pack of Coke or a bag of grapes or apples," Boyd said. "Do you get the Italian coffee or the generic brand coffee?"

Granholm, who normally carries her lunch to work, found it especially challenging because she was in New York for the third presidential debate during the week.

"Going out to dinner was not an option," Boyd said.

Different eating habits

Brennan, his wife and two children brown-bagged their lunches to work and school during the week.

Brennan, who works daily with organizations that help poor and low-income people, carried peanut butter and jelly for lunch.

"I learned that it isn't a sustainable amount of money, and I was less likely to eat healthy food because fruits, vegetables and meats cost more," Brennan said. "I would think more about food.

"One of my daughters was hungry more at the end of the day, and when you're hungry, you tend to be in a bad mood."

The federal food stamp program was designed to make sure people have access to food during difficult economic times.

The majority of the recipients leave the program within nine months, Ahmed said.

Half of food stamp recipients are children, and 8% are 60 and older.

"It was very hard, but I wanted to do this to let people know they could do something to help others," Ahmed said. "People should donate to local food banks or volunteer at a soup kitchen. So many of us are a layoff or one medical emergency away from descending into poverty."

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MICHIGAN REPORT

The Capitol Record Since 1906

REPORT NO. 202, VOLUME 47-- SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19 2008

STATE LEADERS HUMBLLED BY FOOD STAMP CHALLENGE, RENEWED SUPPORT FOR SAFETY NET

After five days of eating on a food assistance budget of under \$6 a day, local and state leaders who took part in Michigan's Food Stamp Challenge said on Friday that they learned it truly is a challenge that takes exhaustive planning and a lot of deprivation to make such a small food budget stretch.

The challenge included nearly 300 people across the state who used a state-provided food assistance debit card called a Bridge card, which was paid for by privately raised funds, or people who pledged they would spend no more than \$29.35 of their own cash from Monday through Friday on food.

From [Governor Jennifer Granholm](#)'s family, who, according to the governor, ate a lot of macaroni and cheese, to Department of Human Services Director Ismael Ahmed, who had to choose to between honey or noodles this week and then ran out of bread for sandwiches by Friday (so was left with hard boiled eggs as his only lunch option) all said their experience gave them a new-found appreciation of the difficulty impoverished people face.

Andy Levin, deputy director of the Department of Labor and Economic Growth, said that even with all of the planning his family of six did before they began the challenge, "it was really hard work.

"It seems to me you have to do everything right if you want to feed your family," he said. "You have to plan more. You have to use leftovers more. We didn't change what we ate but we had to cut down on the waste and only buy what we would eat."

Mr. Ahmed admitted that on Monday, the first day of the challenge, as he stopped for gas and glanced across the street at a coffee shop he normally frequents, he thought about how easy it would be to get his regular \$4 cup of chai tea without anyone knowing he had strayed from the challenge.

"I had to wrestle with myself, but I thought about the 1.3 million people on food stamps in Michigan who don't have that option to spend a day's worth of food at Starbucks and I didn't do it," he said, adding that he quickly realized how fortunate he was that he had additional money to buy the tea.

STRENGTHENING THE SAFETY NET: While DHS had many goals in sponsoring this first time challenge, one main hope is that people will realize the great need for food banks and pantries as a backup support system to those in poverty, said Mr. Ahmed.

[Rep. Joan Bauer](#) (D-Lansing) said she certainly got that message.

Ms. Bauer said that while she valued farmer's markets and food banks before, she now feels driven to make policies that ensure people have access to them so they can eat healthfully on a tight budget.

"It has become real clear that fresh fruits and vegetables are more expensive and to try to work that in my diet was hard," said Ms. Bauer, who opted to budget her daily food expenses at \$5.87 instead of using a Bridge card. "As I look at this, I have a whole new appreciation for the community gardening movement and I know we need to look at a way to get people to donate fresh fruits and vegetables to people on food assistance.

"I thought those projects were nice before, but now I see they are vitally important," she said. "I also have a renewed commitment to food banks because they are where people turn if they run out of food, which I now know would be very easy to do."

There has been a 25 percent increase in the demand at food banks this year and a decrease in donations, Mr. Ahmed said, adding that he thinks it's too early to gauge if the challenge has increased donations but he believes it will ultimately result in increased food and money to local food banks.

Not only is it sometimes cost prohibitive to purchase fresher, healthier foods on a budget, but those foods also are not always available at the only stores that many on assistance have access to, said Carol Goss, president of the Skillman Foundation, which works to improve Detroit schools and neighborhoods.

She said she shopped this week at downtown Detroit stores instead of at suburban markets because she figured that is where most people on assistance would have to go to spend their allotment. What she found was overpriced, lower quality produce and a general inability to make her daily allowance stretch as far as someone who could go from store to store, bargain to bargain.

She said the challenge has pushed her to want to work with urban storeowners to improve the quality of their offerings.

While DHS used this week to help open people's eyes to the many struggles that people in poverty face, the department also hopes to promote interest in its Poverty Summit scheduled for November 13 in Detroit, where 3,000 people will come together to discuss regional solutions to address ways to help the 2 million people who are in poverty in the state, Mr. Ahmed said.

He said he also hopes to get more people thinking about issues such as education and degree completion and job creation and how to do that in Michigan with programs like No Worker Left Behind and a new DHS training project called JET Plus.

Mr. Levin agreed, saying, "The best solution to poverty is a good job."

"We need to try to bring more jobs to Michigan and help people be ready to be more qualified," he said.

A HUMBLING EXPERIENCE: It wasn't lost on anyone who talked about their challenge that they were poor only in "spirit" this week because they still had creature comforts such as cars and nice homes to come home to and could spend with less restraint after five days.

But the days did bring a taste of humbling experiences and gave leaders a glimpse into what it would be like to live on a tight budget all of the time.

Mr. Ahmed was one of several leaders who said he strayed from his normal grocery store to use the Bridge card; in the DHS leader's case, he said it was because he thought if anyone recognized him, they might have questions about why he was using food stamps.

After carefully selecting his purchases so he wouldn't go over his budget, Mr. Ahmed chose a cashier with no line to avoid the embarrassment of not knowing exactly how to use a Bridge card. Unlike many leaders, he has been on food assistance before, but that was back when he was a child, in the days when it came in the form of bulk food instead of an electronic card.

The director swiped his card three times in the automated machine but because he didn't have the correct pin number, the machine wouldn't take his card and with now a dozen people lined up behind Mr. Ahmed, the cashier apologetically told Mr. Ahmed that he would have to pay another way and that he should contact his caseworker.

[Rep. Bob Constan](#) (D-Dearborn Heights) said he shopped mostly at small party stores and other places he thought he wouldn't be picked out as a legislator.

"I was eating a poorer diet because I was going to a smaller stores not wanting to be seen using the card, he said. "It was very humbling."

For his part Scott Dzurka, CEO of the Michigan Association of United Ways, hopes that the experience lifted the stigma of being on assistance at least a little bit.

Mr. Dzurka, when asked why he chose not to partake of free meals at luncheons and other gatherings this week simply answered: "I'm on food stamps."

He said that statement opened up a conversation about experiences and about what people really go through in a more meaningful way than he's seen before.

"I hope that by people doing this challenge, it will have cut out some of the insensitive attitudes," he said.

Mr. Levin agreed, adding that some need the new perspective more than others.

He said: "I would recommend this for any policy maker or really any citizen who thinks poverty is about 'them' and not about 'me'."

Food Stamp Challenge prompts belt tightening



Saturday, October 18, 2008 12:12 AM EDT

**By Karen Workman, Journal Register News Service
Royal Oak Daily Tribune**

The average person receiving the full benefits of food stamp assistance goes grocery shopping with only \$29.35 for a five-day period, or \$5.87 a day.

This week, about 20 employees from Lighthouse of Oakland County are trying to feed themselves with that same amount of money.

"Nearly all you see in a well-stocked grocery store is simply something you cannot afford," said John Ziraldo, CEO and president of Lighthouse, a nonprofit organization that provides assistance to low-income families.

Several Michigan residents and leaders, including Gov. Jennifer Granholm, this week have been taking the "Food Stamp Challenge" this week that concludes today.

The goal is to raise awareness of the challenges facing people who rely on food stamps to feed themselves and their families.

"It really is a challenge," Ziraldo said. "There is this sense that people who are getting assistance are in some way lazy or irresponsible, and you can find lazy and irresponsible people everywhere, but for folks to be able to survive (on food stamps), they have to be very resourceful."

Like many Lighthouse employees participating in the challenge, Ziraldo is keeping a blog of his

experiences. Before the week even began, he wrote that people shopping with food stamps must be "skillful planners."

Another participant called his observation the "understatement of the week."

"In order to make it stretch, you have to look for sales, plan meals carefully and really can't afford to waste or throw any food away," Ziraldo said.

As someone who normally goes out for lunch, Ziraldo has been adjusting to a brown bag lunch featuring peanut butter and jelly on a daily basis. He and his wife ate macaroni and cheese for dinner one night and were planning to have rice and beans on another.

"My sister-in-law has a garden and she gave us some fresh green beans — that was nice," Ziraldo said.

Ziraldo also thought about how many people living in poverty and on food stamps don't usually have the transportation to get to well-stocked grocery stores like a Meijer or Kroger. He stopped in at a small neighborhood market to get a more realistic experience of how people living in poverty shop.

"At the corner store in my neighborhood, the cost of staples like bread and peanut butter is significantly higher, as much as 30 percent I think," Ziraldo said. "They don't even have access to food that's the best value."

Another challenge is trying to find nutritious foods that fit within the budget.

"You're choosing often the cheapest food, which doesn't always lend itself to providing the most nutritious meal," Ziraldo said. "You can get a little package of Ramen Noodles for 20 cents, but obviously that's not going to make a nutritious meal."

Laura Covintree, the chief development officer for Lighthouse, is trying to feed herself and her daughter on the limited budget this week.

"I don't know how you raise kids to eat healthy — you just can't do that on \$5 a day," Covintree said.

She's struggling with a different health concern, too.

"The biggest thing I'm trying to figure out, because I have low blood sugar, is how am I going to maintain my blood sugar levels on \$5.87 a day," she said.

Going out to eat also isn't an option on the \$5-a-day budget.

"Even a meal at a fast-food restaurant consumes nearly all your budget," Ziraldo said.

This is the first time Lighthouse is joining the challenge, which is promoted by the Voices for

Action Network, a collection of community action groups throughout Michigan.

Despite Oakland County's reputation as an affluent place, the number of people signing up to receive food stamps has increased by 11 percent during each of the past two years, Ziraldo said.

"Maybe, through this, we can have that 'ah-ha' moment and realize this is a problem that isn't going away and we all need to come together as a community to find solutions and make sure everyone has food on the table," Covintree said.



Closer to Home: Spokeswoman draws attention to Michigan foster children

By **GRETCHEN MURRAY**
Local Columnist

October 18, 2008 12:00 am

Lisa Niergarth is no stranger to the process of adoption. Niergarth and husband Steve, of Cedar, have three children through international adoption. Two are from Chile and one is from Guatemala.

She wants others to know more about adoption, too, but as the new spokeswoman for Bethany Christian Services' Open Arms Project, Niergarth is trying to bring attention to children closer to home who also are waiting for families of their own.

"I think a lot of people are aware of international adoptions and they know the traditional baby adoptions -- we call them domestic infants -- but I don't think enough people know the numbers and figures of the children who are here in our state foster care system," Niergarth.

Niergarth is trying to build an awareness of the children in the 5- to 18-year-old age bracket who currently are waiting in foster care programs throughout Michigan.

According to John Van Valkenburg, spokesperson for Bethany Christian Services' national office in Grand Rapids, statistics from Michigan's Department of Human Services state that 6,200 children in Michigan's foster care system are eligible for adoption, meaning that their biological parents' rights have been terminated. Additional figures show that between October 2006 and September 2007, 2,481 children were adopted.

"That leaves about 3,600 children who are still waiting. The vast majority wait about five years before an adoption takes place," Niergarth said. "Many children who come into foster care are older. They may have siblings and, while it makes sense to keep families together, it makes it more difficult to find them a home."

Niergarth said some children never do find families before they turn 18.

"Unfortunately, children who have been in foster care until the age of 18 are pretty much said to be adults and sent out on their own."

It's scary when you think about it," she said. The thought resonates with Niergarth who saw her oldest son off to college this fall.

"They really need support, both financial and moral, to help them get through those rough times at the beginning, and these kids are sort of left there. They age out at a time when they're most vulnerable," she said.

"Your heart goes out to these kids. Have you ever thought about where they go for Thanksgiving or Christmas? Or is there anybody there at their high school graduation to yell and be proud of the fact that they made it through? Or how about the young lady who is walking down the aisle? Who walks her down?"

In order to expand recruitment resources for these children, Bethany's Project Open Arms is turning to area churches.

Educating

congregations that the problem exists and engaging them in helping solve the problem is Niergarth's job.

"The idea to approach the Christian community for help came about when Bethany's administrators realized that congregations are groups of people who know that our directive from God is to care for the orphans through (the biblical passage) James 1:27," she said.

She says there's a lot churches can do to help.

"How they engage and what they do is up to an individual church," Niergarth said. "Some may simply choose to pray. Some choose to offer different programs. Others may choose to fund programs through donations. It can be done however they see fit."

Niergarth says congregations could consider supporting those within the church who want to adopt.

"Maybe there is enough talent and resources in the church community to help that family add space for another child. It's called "Wrap around care for adoptive families," she said.

Niergarth also suggests churches might support Foster Care Fun Days or church groups could provide respite care days for foster or adoptive families.

Churches could even offer host Discover Adoption Days, where area agencies' representatives talk to congregations and local communities about adoption or open their doors to support groups.

"At the center of all of this is prayer. We ask that the congregations pray for all these children," Niergarth said.

Part of this education endeavor is what Niergarth calls the watering of the seed. "I guess I believe God has already planted a seed in people who want to adopt. Right now we're just watering it and giving it some sunlight through our education process and watching it grow, and eventually, it's going to grow to the point where people will act on it."

Bethany Christian Services will sponsor a Discover Adoption Day program from 2 to 4 p.m. Nov. 22 in the Community Room of the Grand Traverse Mall. To register, call 995-0870. To reach Lisa Niergarth, e-mail: lniergarth@bethany.org.

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Photos



Gretchen Murray



Lisa Niergarth discusses Bethany Christian Services' Open Arms Project with the Rev. Michael Janowski during a recent presentation at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Leland.

Foster parents told: No smoking

Sunday, October 19, 2008

By Jonathan D. Silver, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For all his adult life, if Lee Baumann wanted to smoke a cigarette in his house, he could -- whenever he pleased.

That's not the case anymore for Mr. Baumann or any other foster parent like him in the state.

Now the pack-a-day Salem smoker is not allowed to light up anywhere in his house or car when his 9-year-old foster son is around for the simple fact that it is illegal.

A little-publicized portion of the state's new Clean Indoor Air Act -- which prohibits smoking in numerous public places like bars and restaurants and some private ones -- has altered Mr. Baumann's daily routine.

The law takes away his freedom to smoke, Mr. Baumann, 53, of Murrysville grouched recently. "I live on my back porch.".....

Not only that, he complains that the state changed the rules midstream.

"That's not the contract that I entered into. It didn't matter whether you smoked in your house or not. Nobody cared. Now the rules got changed," said Mr. Baumann, a self-employed contractor and former law enforcement agent.

The law, which took effect Sept. 11, forbids smoking in private homes or vehicles being used for child-care or "services related to the care of children and youth in state or county custody." That includes foster homes.

Foster parents are still allowed to smoke at home or in vehicles as long as the foster child is not around, according to state Department of Health spokeswoman Stacy Kriedeman.

People such as Mr. Baumann now have to post "No Smoking" signs in their residences.

Mr. Baumann said the boy living with him, his wife and 16-year-old son is his third foster child, and he has no plans to give him up over a cigarette. But the self-avowed libertarian, a smoker since age 12, does not think the government should be telling him what to do in his own house.

"I'll admit that my rights stop at the nose of somebody else, but that needs to go in return," Mr. Baumann said.

"I will either quit or I will modify because I am not going to damage the potential for kids who need qualified foster parenting because I want to smoke. Let's get real," Mr. Baumann said. "But on the other hand, my libertarianism comes through and I say, 'At what point are my rights violated?'"

Mr. Baumann and other foster parents represent only a small slice of those affected by the broad state smoking ban, which has aroused the ire of tavern owners and their smoking patrons.

Deterrent to foster parenting?

While figures are not available for the number of certified foster parents in Pennsylvania, on any given day there are about 20,000 children statewide in foster care, including group homes. There is no way to tell how many foster parents smoke.

The balance of privacy and government intrusion concerns the Pennsylvania Council of Children, Youth and Family Services, a Harrisburg-based trade group. The group worries that the restriction will make it even more difficult to attract foster parents, of which there are never enough.

"It adds an additional challenge to recruiting families," said Bernadette Bianchi, the group's executive director, though she noted that it would be months before she could gauge the impact.

"Certainly there's merit and we would want to prevent children from being exposed to second-hand smoke," Ms. Bianchi said. "This seemingly crossed over on that line of a private residence. Foster parents are not employees of an agency."

Liz DeLosa, manager of placement services for Every Child Inc. in East Liberty, said the law is fine as long as it does not cause disruptions within the child welfare system.

"I just would hate to see children already bonded to families be disrupted from that home because of a family's unwillingness to quit smoking," Ms. DeLosa said.

Violations "may very well lead to removal, God forbid. Honestly, that kind of sticks in my gut. What's more traumatic for a child, second-hand smoke or possibly being removed from a situation that they're bonding to?"

As the bill was being put together by legislators, the state Health Department advocated for the most "comprehensive" smoking ban possible, Ms. Kriedeman said.

Kids are first priority

The state Department of Public Welfare, which regulates foster homes, said it has the best interests of children at heart.

"The health and safety of our kids is priority No. 1 for us every single day," department spokeswoman Stacey Witalec said. "I understand what [Mr. Baumann's] concerns are, that government is coming and mandating something in his home. But at the same time we have to protect the child that is in his care. End of story."

It sounds simple, but there are complicated questions arising from the ban. What should foster parents do, for instance, with foster children who smoke? How should smoking foster parents pay for cessation programs? Will foster parents who feel they are being forced to quit be able to do so if they really don't want to?

Simply being a smoker will not preclude someone from serving as a foster parent. First violations currently result in no more than a letter from the state. And state officials are not planning to pre-screen parents.

Taking the pledge

But some placement agencies, such as Every Child Inc., are forcing foster parents to sign a pledge not to smoke in their home or vehicle while their foster child is present. Ms. DeLosa said her group was asked to draft the pledge by its overseer, Allegheny County.

"We would no longer be certifying or recertifying any foster families who are smoking within their home. Needless to say we have some pretty angry foster parents," Ms. DeLosa said.

Under the law, a violation can trigger a \$250 fine. And on a local level, children might be turned into informants.

Allegheny County caseworkers visiting foster children might ask whether their caretakers are smoking in the house, said Elaine Plunkett, a spokeswoman for the county's Department of Human Services.

Despite Mr. Baumann's irritation and sense of inconvenience, he acknowledged that the smoking ban is good for his foster child's health.

Nevertheless, he believes state government should expend its energy on ironing out other problems, such as those in the juvenile justice system, rather than focusing on smoking in foster homes.

"What I'm saying is in the grand scheme of things, would the Legislature's time be more valuable addressing the abuse of children ... or my smoking," Mr. Baumann said.

"We spend all the time on that issue. How much time do we spend on alcohol? And I will guarantee you there is more damage done in this society by alcohol than by cigarettes," Mr. Baumann said.

State Rep. Joseph Markosek, D-Monroeville, whose district includes Murrysville, spoke at length with Mr. Baumann recently. Mr. Markosek said in an interview that it may be worth re-examining the ban "if it does create a problem for foster parents and perhaps recruiting or keeping foster parents."

However, the legislator said he doesn't think his colleagues would risk modifying the law considering how long it took to put together and because it would be the start of a slippery slope for those wanting to change other sections.

Apart from fears among some that the ban will become an impediment to attracting foster parents, there seems to be no opposition to the desire to protect children from smoke.

"So far we haven't seen any changes in our abilities to recruit families. Families are made aware of this and many, many other rules and regulations that are state-mandated and that are upheld by our organization," said Brandy Kift, spokeswoman for Families United Network in Lycoming County.

"I think this just gets added to the list and if someone is truly dedicated and wants to be a foster parent I don't think this will affect them," Ms. Kift said. "I know this is an inconvenience for folks who've smoked for years, but unfortunately there's nothing that we as an organization can do for them."

"I think it's good," said Jesse McLean, manager of foster care and community partnerships with Family Services of Western Pennsylvania in East Liberty.

"I think we all know what data shows in regards to secondhand smoke, and a child doesn't ask to be put in that situation," Mr. McLean said.

Out of 61 foster families his group works with, only three have smokers, Mr. McLean said. There has not been any outcry.

"They're OK with it," Mr. McLean said. "I don't think it's going to discourage foster parents. I think it will just let them see the importance of taking care of a child who is coming into your home because [the state's] standards are much higher, and they should be."

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October 17, 2008

Fix outdated poverty measure

By JANE ZEHNDER-MERRELL

As the state of Michigan and more communities struggle to find solutions to poverty, we must have a better idea of what poverty means to the state's lower-income children.

The current poverty measure is outdated and does not reflect the cost of basic needs for families in today's economy. Legislation now in the U.S. House and Senate, however, would modernize the way we identify poverty and yield a more accurate picture on which to base our public policies and programs.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's current poverty measure, 19% of Michigan children live in poverty, which means the household has an annual income of less than \$21,200 for a family of four.

The current definition is rooted in the 1960s, when the cost of food took about a third of a typical family's budget. So the cost of an economical food plan was calculated and tripled to create the poverty line. While that poverty line has been adjusted for inflation over the years, living standards have changed, and food is now only about one-seventh of a typical family's budget.

The poverty measure doesn't account for the fact that a much larger number of women are in the workforce today. It doesn't consider that child care, transportation and housing consume a much larger share of family income than 40 years ago. In fact, some analysts suggest that the current formula uses a "poverty line" income that in reality would purchase only about 60% of a family's most basic needs.

On the other hand, the poverty measurement underestimates the total income and benefits on which many low-income families rely. While it includes cash benefits (Michigan's Family Independence Program), it leaves out food stamps, Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Tax Credit and housing assistance. As a result, it not only understates the income and benefits of many low-income Michigan families, it yields no information on whether our key public investments are working to lift people out of poverty.

It's of little surprise, then, that poverty experts across the political spectrum want to revise the measure. Conservative scholar Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute has even dubbed it "America's worst statistical indicator."

The new measure could increase or decrease the number of people counted as poor. In New York City, which adopted a poverty measure this summer similar to the proposed federal measure, the number of elderly counted as poor grew from 18% to 32% when out-of-pocket medical expenses were factored in. At the same time, the new measure counted fewer extremely poor residents with incomes half of the poverty threshold, possibly the result of including more government benefits.

After years of debating the issue, the U.S. Congress now has bills in both houses to revise the poverty measure: The Measuring American Poverty Act of 2008 in the House (H.R. 6941) and the Senate (S. 3636).

The new measure would include the costs of transportation and child care, and consider the much higher costs of health care, housing, utilities and clothing. Geographic differences would also be taken into account. For example, the average home sold in Ann Arbor this year was \$225,000, significantly higher than Jackson, where the average house purchased was \$85,000.

The proposed measure would also acknowledge for the first time federal, state and local government supports that help put food on the table or cover winter heating bills.

A statewide poverty summit in Detroit on Nov. 13 is aimed at finding solutions to poverty (see

www.michigan.gov/poverty).

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once said that “you can't solve a problem until you first learn to measure it.” As we push forward with solutions, we need to bring our poverty measurements into the 21st Century in order to get a more accurate picture of how children and families are faring in Michigan and its communities

JANE ZEHNDER-MERRELL *is director of the Kids Count in Michigan project, and a senior research associate at the Michigan League for Human Services.*

Article published Monday, October 20, 2008

Measure of poverty inaccurate, critics say

TOLEDO BLADE STAFF

Every year, the federal government updates its poverty threshold - now about \$21,027 for a family of four, according to the latest Census data.

Families earning less than that are officially considered to be "poor" or "below the poverty line."

But many say the government's method doesn't accurately count the true number of people who are poor. The number is based on a calculation done in the early 1960s and completely unchanged since then except for inflation, said Rebbeca M. Blank, the Robert V. Kerr senior fellow in economics at the Brookings Institution. Ms. Blank is the former dean of the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy at the University of Michigan and served as co-director of the National Poverty Center.

The original calculation was based on the cost of a family food budget in 1955, multiplied by three, as food used to account for about one-third of a family's expenditures, Ms. Blank explained. The government's poverty standard has faced criticism because it only counts cash income, not taxes, and not the benefits many low-income families now receive, such as food stamps, housing vouchers, and medical assistance.

The standard is also based on expenditure patterns that are completely outdated, Ms. Blank said. The measure is benchmarked to food, which is no longer one-third of a family's expenses, but now closer to one-eighth, she said. A more accurate measure would include food, clothing, shelter, and utilities, she said.

The measure also uses a single threshold for the whole country. But housing prices and the cost of living are wildly different from rural Ohio to, say, New York City or Los Angeles. In July, New York City released its own poverty measure.

"If we are serious about fighting poverty, we also have to start getting serious about accurately measuring poverty," New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said in a statement when he released the new measure. "Since the mid-'60s, the economy has vastly changed. So has society and so have government benefits, but the poverty formula hasn't adjusted in response. We can't devise effective strategies for tackling poverty until we understand its full dimensions."

Ms. Blank said there is pending legislation in Congress to develop a more modern poverty measure.

- Kate Giammarise